

Gourmands

on the

Run!

By

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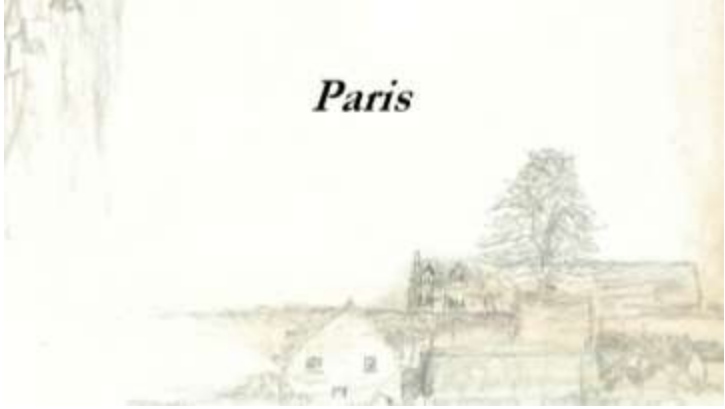
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PART 1

LEAVING

PARIS



Saying goodbye to the staff at the Maurice Hotel in Paris was like leaving home for the first time, and they were sensitive enough not to mention that more 'family' would soon be checking in and replace us.

Tom and I had arranged to rendezvous there two days earlier to make final preparations for our gourmet trip, starting off in the Loire Valley and ending on the

Côte d'Azur. Preparations that mostly involved him calling New York, yelling at his secretary and travel agent alternately, demanding if they had made all the bookings he had requested.

I kept quiet, nodded in agreement and stayed out of it because we had a long way to go, a journey ahead, and many meals to get through together.

We had a generous breakfast in the magnificent dining room under a ceiling of gilt and painted cherubs and set off with great purpose.

Tom got fed up waiting for the bellboy, so we dragged our own cases into the ornate lift to reception where they looked at us with pity in their eyes as we paid the eye

wateringly exorbitant bill.

Interestingly in 1771 Maurice originally opened a coach inn on Rue Edmond Roche in Calais for English clientele, and by 1815 had opened the Hôtel Maurice located at 223 Rue Saint-Honoré. It offered areas where travellers could sit and talk, got laundry soap, English-speaking staff, and currency exchange. It was advertised, “For an English traveller.”

Now the hotel was on the Rue de Rivoli, in a luxurious Louis XV1 styled building near luxury boutiques, which unfortunately was of no benefit to me.

We headed out to Avis to pick up a hire car, which should have been a simple task but turned into a ‘battle royal’.

Normally we worked fairly well as a doubles team but we still had to be fairly careful when dealing with two fatal flaws in life;

Incompetence, and sheer neglect had the same face all over the world and Tom was particularly quick at becoming hysterical when faced with either of these predicaments.

I used to watch in horror at his agitated performances, especially in front of the French, except I saw he got results and realised his 'selective impatience' was a powerful weapon.

We were two extensive travellers picking up a car, so what could be simpler? All smiles and charm, we presented papers

and payment to the attractive middle aged blond and assumed it would be expedited swiftly. Normally it was, but not today, and in seconds I felt us sliding into the invisible black hole of chaos as she cross-examined each page.

She consulted her colleague; they shrugged a lot, mumbled a bit, ticked a few boxes then carelessly pointed outside to the street from behind the service desk. We didn't understand a thing; she didn't care, so eventually we insisted on being personally led to our car, and not left to negotiate the underground car parks in Paris.

In the damp dark subterranean forest of parked cars she found some grey four-

door thing but had forgotten to point out that by simply putting the key into the door lock it activated all security functions, which rendered the car completely inactive. It was ridiculous.

The Avis lady still had a future until she tried to start the engine with the key and again activated all the security systems. Her explanation was that we had not got into the car quick enough, and the delay of those seconds was indeed our fault.

I think the look on our faces in this increasingly absurd situation was beginning to make her nervous, and I suggested we take her along with us for the two weeks in case of any other hidden devices.

She now hated both the Yanks and the

English, and with good reason. Tom was shouting, the car was screaming, the baggage lay around a dark underground car park, and I just wanted to get back outside into normality and sunlight.

When Tom got into a panic due to someone's incompetence, it could be described like a sharks feeding frenzy.

Sometimes he forgot who the intended victim was and could turn in a split second and bite chunks out of me.

To conclude, as I asked her if there were any other security codes for the car I saw the whites of his eyes roll and the sound track to the film Jaws played loudly in my head.

He was a hysterical customer, acting like a mental case out on parole, shouting his favourite line that he had a group of lawyers (the dream team) just waiting to sue them all.

The peace, splendour, and dignity of the hushed, safe, secure world of The Maurice Hotel was now way, way behind us and the uncharted open road through France lay ahead.

As the car park barrier lifted and we emerged into the Paris sunlight I clipped in my safety belt and took a deep breath.

* * *

Wending and winding through the Paris streets, luggage on board, maps in hand, we were excited, and full of self-congratulations.

“Oops,” a wrong turn. “Excuse moi, monsieur!” He yelled continuously through his open window like a local.

Navigating the exit highway full of trucks, his foot pushed flat to the floor, I prayed in silence “please God they all stay in their own lane.”

He drove like a basketball player weaving between cars, one hand on the wheel the other on leaning on the door and I decided not look ahead in case I saw death approaching.

Signs, pointing to other signs, next to signs, alongside more signs, and other signs which didn't want to be read, all shouted different messages at us.

Squashed mice, jumping black birds, cyclists pedalling like messengers with a mission, changing lights, and more traffic weaved around and in front of us. Miles of white lines flickered by, and all was well as we ate up the miles on a new endless road heading west into the rain.

The shark I travelled with was satisfied for

the day with his Avis victim as he had
burnt off his chimney of internal anger,
and I could now relax - until tomorrow.



Le Pissour

Being in pursuit of great food was like buying a painting from an unknown artist; you were always driven by the thrill of expectation.

The Relais Châteaux gourmet cuisine establishments also happened to be housed in the most splendid real estate like monasteries on hills commanding the best

views, gorgeous walled gardens, riverside banks, or behind old town ramparts belonging to another era.

They were another world unto themselves, and it was all part of a complex French formula that I wished I had understood more about, and were part of. It was like a secret order.

I knew that not all French towns were pretty, not all French women were beautiful, and not all-French food was good.

When someone in the local planning office designed the one-way system and ordered several dozen 'centre ville signs' they created a modern day motorist's nightmare - but they knew that.

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